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Reply

Stewart R. Clegg, Martin Kornberger and Carl Rhodes

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

When the Saints go Marching In: A Reply to Sturdy, Clark, Fincham and Handley

First of all we would like to thank Sturdy, Clark, Fincham and Handley for their response to our recent article in *Management Learning* (Clegg et al., 2004). We are delighted that our article has sparked off a discussion on consulting in management and organization theory. As Sturdy et al. suggest, the literature on management consulting is often 'sterile, atheoretical and overly prescriptive' (2004: 337) and, as such, debating the problems and possibilities of consulting is indeed long overdue. Further, we would like to acknowledge the constructive, encouraging and friendly tone of voice of much of their critique—although our views differ, we respect the way that their statement is imbued with passion and a scholarly appreciation of the issues at stake. In replying to their response, we want to address some of the issues that they make. This reply is not intended to repeat the ideas in our original article—what would be the point given that we wrote what we wrote—but rather to elaborate on their response in terms of its implications both for consulting and for the 'critical tradition' from which Sturdy et al. claim to write.

The enigmatic title of Sturdy et al.'s response refers to the Greek mythological figure Procrustes. The claim to fame of Procrustes' (literally meaning 'he who stretches') is in his treatment of travellers he invited to stay at his house. Procrustes had a 'magic' bed that he claimed could fit anyone. In a way he was right—visited by short travellers he would stretch them with chains until they fitted; visited by tall travellers he would cut off their legs. In both cases there is, of course, some significant pain and disfigurement that occurs in the process. Eventually Procrustes died at the hands of the hero Theseus by having his own legs (and head) cut off so that he also was made to fit his bed. The reason they refer to this myth in their title is not explicit in the text: however, we might imagine that it is thought that the theorizing on consulting that we did in our article was designed to disfigure what Sturdy et al. refer to as our use of 'an impressive range of

theorists from critical traditions' (2004: 339) by placing them in the painful bed of managerialism where one size fits all.

Sturdy et al. argue that our contribution 'stops very short of offering a critique and therefore generating substantially novel insights' (2004: 337) into the phenomenon of consulting. Nevertheless, the novel insights that they seem to desire are of a very particular type. Emblematic of the critical management studies orthodoxies that they faithfully reproduce, such critique can only be valid if its goals are the emancipation of (possibly unwilling) others on the funeral pyre of managerialism. It is a critique whose rhetoric establishes two opponents—the exploitative managerialists on the side of capital, those who would be demonized, and the haloed critics on the saintly side of the workers. When the saints go marching in, who wouldn't want to be in their ranks?

Although we agree that critique is a valuable enterprise, we are concerned that, too often, critical accounts preach to the converted only and therefore have little effect other than reinforcing the gap between those painted as saintly critical spirits and those who are positioned as their self-professed managerial others. The fellow travellers appear to have little need or capacity for change: they enjoy the sleep of the just, irrespective of the bed in which they lie. For Sturdy et al. our article 'remains firmly rooted within management discourse and within an apolitical and acontextual view of organizations and relationships' (2004: 337)—which, we proffer, is an odd statement given that the management discourse they talk of seems to be an all too convenient, disembodied and defaced Other against which they pitch their identities. If one agrees that management is a homogeneous and omnipotent *embedded* discourse that powerfully (over)determines what actual managers do, then perhaps it is easy to claim, as do Sturdy et al., that anyone who writes favourably about the possibilities of management is reinforcing (even celebrating) existing power relations and managerialism. Unfortunately we lack the convenience that the clarity of the ideologue (one who knows the answers before the question) provides.

Contrary to Sturdy et al.'s claims, we did not intend to 'celebrate' consulting as a 'privileged arena' (2004: 337) or as a space in which exclusive change agents exercise their agency alone—the notion of the parasite that we draw on should make clear that our conceptions of consultants is one where they are ambiguous contemporaries and strange bedfellows.

Sturdy et al. argue that we ignore power as it is exercised in the consulting process. They suggest that people and groups are often silenced and marginalized since their place in the hierarchy of power does not provide them with the space to speak out or a place to speak from. We find this suggestion quite reasonable—and, given our auspices (especially Clegg, 1989) and other recent work (e.g. Clegg, 2000, 2002; Rhodes, 2001) this should not be surprising (although we find the claim that we ignore power more designed to provoke than to analyse, for frankly it is a ludicrous claim). The point of the parasite is not that all consultants are of a particular disposition or practice, but that it can be the business of consultants to disrupt business as usual and make fissures in hierarchies of power (at least temporarily). Whether this has emancipatory outcomes will be questionable—empirically. However, critical or not, we are, we suspect, somewhat more realistic and less fanciful in our ambitions for the impact of any form of intervention on

organizations—especially one from consultants. Still, one must look for the conceptual silver linings and the possibilities—the point, perhaps, of our article?

Sturdy et al.'s comments might tell us more about their reading habits and their theoretical bedrocks than about our article. The underlying spirit of their comment is an attitude that is quite common in UK business schools these days, where critical academics seem to take sport in biting the managerial hand that feeds them: one can only think that this must occasionally engender puzzlement among young people expecting to learn about something or other rather more often than its critique. Here managers are represented as being (to use Sturdy et al.'s metaphor), similar to karaoke singers gleefully singing along to the bouncing ball of the managerialist hymn, while the silenced majority will not be in any number where managerialist academics do the harmonies. Such a majority, it would seem, can only stand as 'lonesome travellers, through this big wide world of sin', secure in that future when they will be 'there for that judgement, when the saints go marchin' in'. Well, we stand condemned—we are not singing from this hymn-sheet. For us, valuing critique need not mean being 'against management' (Parker, 2002) as a matter of predisposition, assumption or identity. In realist terms one might as well be against 'capitalism' or some other essence. It might make some people feel good emotively, or righteous morally, but it is profoundly pointless in the present times. Better, we think, to focus on middle-range things—such as what consultants might do—that can make a difference. This does not mean 'tinkering with managerial practice' (Sturdy et al., 2004: 339) and 'reinforcing existing power relations' (Sturdy et al., 2004: 337), nor does it mean the emancipation of some faceless others. It does mean, however, that we can attest to the possibility that people at work might be able to 'step out and back from their roles and re-negotiate them' (Sturdy et al., 2004: 338). Agency and critique are not the unique privileges of the intellectual.

As a final comment, an intention of our article was (not dissimilarly to consultants) to intervene into what seems to be, in certain academic circles, a pitched battle between the twin straw men of critical management theorists and those who are slaves to the power of the managerialists. According to our approach, interrupting and disturbing the system, by inducing noise, is the best way to achieve interventions. It seems as if we have achieved our objective with some, at least, who have a professed interest in these things—now we have to make sense of this experience and explore further ways of understanding the constitution of present taken-for-granted realities. Sturdy et al.'s reply is one, hesitant, albeit somewhat predetermined step, in this direction. Legs intact, we walk on, wryly refusing the saintly cavalcade.

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Contact Addresses

Stewart R. Clegg, Martin Kornberger and **Carl Rhodes** are at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.
[email: s.clegg@uts.edu.au]